



## Djibouti

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

There were isolated reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Familial and societal customs discourage proselytizing.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 8,450 square miles and a population of 660,000. More than 99 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. There are a small number of Roman Catholics, Protestants, Copts, Ethiopian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Baha'is. Foreign-born Djiboutians, as well as many expatriate residents, are often members of these denominations. Citizens are officially considered Muslims if they do not specifically identify with another faith.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

Although Islam is the state religion, the Government imposes no sanctions on those who choose to ignore Islamic teachings or to practice other faiths. The Government maintains diplomatic relations with the Vatican.

The president is required to take a religious oath at inauguration. Other government employees are also required to do so, including magistrates, the presidents of the Constitutional Court, Supreme Court, and Chamber of Accounts, and the State Inspector General. While there is no penalty established by law for noncompliance, it remains an official custom written in the Constitution for the president of the country and required by law for others. No legal provision provides for alternative practice.

The Shari'a Court has been replaced by the Family Court. This court applies the Family Code, which includes elements of civil and Shari'a law, to rule on family-related matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance. These courts have jurisdiction over Muslims only; non-Muslims are directed toward civil courts.

The Government requires that a religious group register by submitting an application to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which, along with the Ministry of the Interior, investigates the group. Once approved, the group signs

an initial 2-year bilateral agreement detailing the scope of the group's activities.

Foreign clergy and missionaries are permitted to perform charitable works and to sell religious books. These groups, which focus on humanitarian services in the education and health sectors, reportedly faced no harassment during the period covered by this report. Foreign missionary groups are licensed by the Government to operate schools. Religion is not taught in public schools.

The country observes Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, the Islamic New Year, and the Ascension of the Prophet as national holidays.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

The Family Court does not have jurisdiction over non-Muslims; instead the latter have recourse to civil courts. Civil marriage is permitted only for non-Muslim foreigners. Muslims are required to marry in a religious ceremony, and a non-Muslim man may marry a Muslim woman only after converting to Islam. According to article 23 of the Family Code, "impediment to a marriage occurs when a Muslim woman marries a non-Muslim."

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs monitors the activities of Muslims, but it does not restrict their religious practices. The Ministry has authority in all Islamic matters, including mosques, private religious schools (along with the Ministry of Education), religious events, as well as general Islamic guidelines of the state. The High Islamic Council, officially established within the Ministry in 2004, is mandated to give advice on all religious issues and concerns. It also is in charge of coordinating all Islamic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the country.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### Section III Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were isolated reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

There is no legal prohibition against proselytizing; however, societal norms and customs discourage proselytizing by non-Muslims, and non-Muslim religious groups generally did not engage in active, visible proselytizing activities.

The relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, some representatives of Christian denominations noted an increase in societal animosity towards non-Muslims in recent years. As in previous years, there were isolated reports of school children throwing rocks at churches. Churches differentiated between the Government's tolerant attitude toward them and what some worried was rising public animosity. Government officials were described as tolerant and respectful.

Moderate Muslim clerics attributed a rise in Islamic fundamentalism in part to the international media, local Saudi Salafi/Wahhabi-inspired schools, and the growing number of graduates from Saudi Arabian and Yemeni Islamic schools abroad. The Government does not regulate foreign curriculum. However, according to the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, local moderate Islamic traditions tend to have a mainstreaming effect on scholars educated abroad.

French Roman Catholics and Ethiopian Orthodox Christians have been part of society for almost a century and are an example of the considerable familiarity with, and tolerance of, other faiths by the Muslim majority. There are no legal repercussions for conversion from Islam to another religion or for marrying outside of Islam; however, converts may face negative societal, tribal, and familial attitudes towards their decision.

Approximately 60 percent of the population is ethnic Somali. In the ethnic Somali community, clan membership has more influence over a person's life than does religion. Nonetheless, ethnic Somalis who are Christians are often buried according to Islamic traditions by relatives who do not recognize their non-Muslim faith.

The Roman Catholic Church organizes an annual celebration with all the other Christian churches. The Minister of Islamic Affairs has received Ramadan greetings from the Pope. The Minister of Islamic Affairs meets with the heads of other religious groups occasionally and at government-organized ceremonies. However, there is currently no formal interfaith dialogue between the Government and religious groups, or among various religious groups.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. Embassy representatives periodically meet with leaders and members of religious communities and with U.S. NGOs with a faith-based component to discuss common interest issues and promote tolerance. The Embassy has engaged several of its English Language Discussion Groups in discussions of religious freedom and tolerance. The Ambassador uses representational events to promote discussions on religious tolerance and understanding.

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